

ROLL CALL

The future of Amtrak; Debate Must Move Past Profitability
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BYLINE: By Sen. Tom Carper

BODY:

Amtrak's Northeast Corridor has given the nation, and the citizens of Delaware, a glimpse of what high-speed intercity passenger rail holds for our country. To secure this success and duplicate it in other major intercity corridors, Congress must collectively face the challenges that we have deferred for too long. Certainly, the issues surrounding the provision of intercity passenger rail service are not easily solved, yet with honesty and diligence, they can be managed. We must move past the simplistic and reactionary rhetoric issued by both sides of this debate and confront the fundamental questions of size, scope and cost that define our national rail

passenger service. Only when we have tackled these defining questions can Congress move toward creating a revitalized Amtrak that enables intercity passenger rail to live up to its potential. I believe that in Amtrak, we have the basic tools in place to successfully launch an intercity passenger rail renaissance in this country. Amtrak today offers a safe, convenient, energy efficient and environmentally friendly transportation choice for intercity travel. We can and should find ways to improve and expand service where it makes sense, including the development of high-speed rail corridors around the country. However, we have not yet achieved passenger rail's potential to fight highway and aviation congestion, which will benefit our environment and reduce our dependence on foreign oil. To maximize these benefits, we must invest in our passenger rail system by creating a long-term, sustainable federal funding mechanism to provide Amtrak and the states with a fair and consistent source of capital and operating support for intercity passenger rail.

We must also move past the simple "profitability" debate that hangs like a cloud over Amtrak and intercity passenger rail. Some of the greatest critics of Amtrak's lack of profitability are strong supporters of public transit in their states or districts, even though such services are inherently "unprofitable" and require both capital and operating subsidization. Yet unlike transit, Congress required Amtrak to rid itself of federal operating support by 2002 despite the fact that Amtrak recovers a significantly higher portion of its operating costs through passenger fares than almost all transit services. In earlier decades, transit faced battles for legitimacy and federal support much like Amtrak today, but through vision and leadership, Congress created a federal, state and local partnership that has allowed transit to prove its potential and relevance. We now have the opportunity to do the same with intercity passenger rail.

Accompanying our work to define the role of intercity passenger rail in America must be support for the good work that David Gunn, current Amtrak president and chief executive officer, has done to control costs, improve service and reliability, create a

leaner, more responsive management structure, and invest in the infrastructure and assets that make up the core of any railroad. Gunn has brought a new era of credibility to Amtrak by speaking the truth about Amtrak's real financial needs and the problems caused by the lack of a long-term source of dependable capital funding. As we approach the close of Gunn's first year on the job, we see a more open and transparent company that has trimmed its work force by approximately 1,000 employees, has cut costs by the millions, and has made substantial progress toward returning the railroad to a fully functioning state.

Congress must follow suit by providing Amtrak with the near term funds the company requires to get it firmly on the road to financial solvency. Barring a very expensive and politically unfeasible decision to end all intercity passenger rail in America, these measures must be completed to bring Amtrak to a state of good repair regardless of Congress' plans for the future of Amtrak. Without well-maintained, functional assets, any alternative model to provide intercity passenger rail service, whether through the federal government, the states, a private entity or some other option, is extremely expensive and doomed to fail.

Once Amtrak is in a position of solvency and stability, Congress can work with it and with state and local governments to develop and strengthen intercity rail passenger service into a service that is ready to meet the transportation needs of the 21st century. I believe that by creating a true federal, state and local partnership process to fund rail infrastructure, we can unlock the potential of intercity passenger rail along Amtrak's best routes and bring high-speed rail to viable corridors across the country. I will be offering a plan to do so this year. Some may disagree with this approach, but it is then their responsibility to propose a functional alternative that can realistically result in continued and improved intercity passenger rail service.

The Senate has proven this year, through several tough votes, that support for Amtrak and intercity passenger rail is solid and can overcome unrealistic plans to underfund, prematurely restructure or kill the system. As recent major polls show, a consistent 70 percent of Americans, from across the country and of various ages and political persuasions, favor continuing federal support to Amtrak or increasing federal funding for Amtrak service expansions. We owe it to the American people to find a productive way to end our battles and enable the type of high-quality, high-speed intercity passenger rail service that Americans desire and deserve.

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